

# PROJECT "FEELING YOU(TH) "

of the P&V Foundation



**FOUNDATION P&V**  
*emancipation participation  
citizenship solidarity*

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# Explanatory note

Reflection moment between researchers and young people  
on mental health of young people

## Context

Mental health is fundamental at every stage of the life cycle, including certainly during the childhood years. In recent years, however, we have seen a worrying picture of the mental health of Belgian adolescents. A third of them felt nervous or irritable more than once a week in the past six months, and one in four reported sleep problems and/or feelings of despondency or depression. Although the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown measures contributed to this situation, they do not explain everything. Adolescents' life satisfaction and self-reported health have been declining since 2018, while health complaints such as sleep problems, back or headaches and feelings of depression have been increasing since 2014 (see Health Behaviour in School-aged Children, 2021-22).

## Multi-year project

Therefore, the P&V Foundation has launched a new multi-year Research/Action Programme (2024-2026) with different phases to improve the mental health of young people.

In a first phase, 6 researchers and some 50 young people from all over Belgium reflected together on ways to promote the mental well-being of young people. During this reflection moment, organised on 13 March 2023 in Brussels, we thus gathered insights on the causes of mental problems among young people, which groups need (extra) attention, the optimal timing for actions, effective methods for support, and the locations where young people are.

This note summarises the findings and provides the basis of our new call for projects Feeling You(th), or the second phase of our multi-year project.

## Why?

What are causes of young people's mental unwellness? The reflection moment between researchers and young people revealed several factors contributing to young people's mental unwellness:

- Discrimination (racism, sexism, discrimination based on sexual orientation, etc.)
- Bullying and trauma, such as death of a parent or abuse
- Financial problems
- Conflictual environment (in the family, at school ...)
- Loneliness
- Personal sensitivities (insecurity, low self-confidence, comparison with others, problems with emotion regulation, ...)
- Performance pressure (at school but also outside)
- Lack of empathy, understanding and communication, both between generations and within social groups
- Societal challenges and evolutions, such as the climate crisis, lack of social representation, stigma and taboos, and online disinformation.

## Who?

When asked about possible target groups, the comment came, on the one hand, that all young people, regardless of their background, should be the subject of actions around mental health. On the other hand, the research and testimonies also showed that certain target groups deserve extra attention, because they are more prone to mental problems or are less reached by existing initiatives.

- All **young people**, regardless of background
- All **genders**, each with their specific problems (although research shows that girls and LGBTQIA+ youth report higher mental discomfort, our attention was also drawn to mental problems in boys, who may be less likely to report their problems)
- Young people **in difficult family situations** (young people who cannot live with their parents, young people where there are many conflicts at home, etc.)
- Young people **in poverty**
- Young people **with a migration background**

- Young people **with health problems**, handicaps or whose brains work in different ways.

## When?

Participants in the reflection moment emphasised the need for the Foundation to work around:

- **Promotion, prevention, and early intervention/detection** regarding mental well-being of young people.
  - *Promotion* involves promoting protective factors for mental health.
  - *Prevention* involves reducing risk factors for mental problems. Three levels of prevention are usually distinguished: universal prevention (for everyone), selective prevention (for high-risk groups) and indicated prevention (for individuals with problems or increased risk of problems).
  - *Early detection/intervention* involves rapid identification and treatment of early signs of mental health problems to prevent exacerbation.
- **During adolescence.** Although mental well-being can take a hit at all life moments, the research and discussions with young people revealed that adolescence is an important catalyst and therefore deserves extra attention.
- **But also focusing on critical moments**, such as:
  - *transitions in life stages* that may cause additional stress and sensitivity (e.g. transition from primary to secondary school, from secondary school to higher education, from education to job (search)) or
  - *periods when young people may feel lonely* (e.g. at night, in summer, during long inactive periods).

## How?

To promote young people's mental well-being or prevent mental unwellness, the following was recommended to us by researchers and young people:

- Integrating the voice **of young people**: Young people need to be heard, especially when it comes to their own mental well-being and actions to promote it. Different degrees are distinguished:

- (1) Information: are young people informed of a particular action?
  - (2) Consultation: are young people being listened to?
  - (3) Advising: are young people allowed to suggest actions?
  - (4) Coproducing: Can young people decide something with others?
  - (5) Co-decision: Can young people decide for themselves?
- Promote **qualitative social interactions**, both offline and online. This includes interactions with peers, siblings, parents, and trusted adults. Connection with other people is very important for mental well-being.
  - **Media education and digital citizenship**: Social media are not the cause of all evil. They are also used to communicate fear, sadness and unwellness. Young people (and their environment) do need to learn to be active online users (not just passive users), break online stereotypes, recognise and counter cyberbullying, ...
  - Strengthening **personal development**: For youngsters this includes e.g. training in emotion regulation, strengthening social skills, resilience, agency and developing a positive self-image. It is also important to normalise that it is okay to feel bad sometimes.
  - **Sensitisation and destigmatisation**: Mental health should be made discussable, and taboos should be broken. It is also important to recognise signs of mental unwellness, both by young people themselves and by parents, teachers, coaches and youth workers. Campaigns launched on this should be diversity-sensitive.
  - Provide a **listening ear and a sense of community**: This can be done through
    - (1) Anonymous listening lines, chats, apps, ...,
    - (2) confidants (peer-to-peer, at school, from external organisations, in sports clubs...),
    - (3) communities and groups where young people can meet and exchange experiences (offline and online), and/or
    - (4) places where young people can get (free) support.

Young people find it important to be truly heard, to be able to talk confidentially, and to feel acknowledged and recognized. This can be facilitated by using young people as confidants (peer to peer), or people who share the same experience and/or background.

- Organising **sports, creative and other activities** aimed at improving mental well-being.

- (1) In general, 2 hours of (intensive) sport per week appears to be a protective factor (higher self-esteem, greater belief in one's own abilities, positive changes in mood and emotions, ...).
  - (2) In addition, young people also see an impact of therapeutic creative or sporting pursuits (activities that also aim to be therapeutic, e.g. a multi-day hike in the mountains, or expressing emotions through writing their own texts).
  - (3) Finally, they also recognise the importance of other organised activities aimed at personal development and guidance of (socially vulnerable) young people (self-expression, coaching, games, hobbies...).
- Providing **meeting places for young people** that are accessible and inclusive, which can create a sense of belonging and thus higher mental well-being. By accessibility and inclusiveness, they mean: geographic, language, gender, social, financial, cultural, information, ... This means that young people should get there easily (or these should be close to home or school), everyone should feel welcome there (regardless of background) and they should be a safe space for young people, they should be financially accessible, they should be known to young people (there is a lack of information), they should give opportunities to young people, ...

## Where?

Young people are in several places where intervention could be made, including:

- At home (in the family, in their bedroom...)
- At school
- Online
- With friends
- On the streets, in parks, in squares...
- In youth clubs, youth houses, student associations...
- In organised hobbies (sports, drawing, etc.)
- In supporting organisations and institutions
- At cultural venues (cinema, theatre, library, etc.)
- At (student) work

- In places of worship

## Conclusion

The insights from the reflection moment provide a valuable basis for developing (policy) measures and actions that can improve young people's mental well-being. By paying attention to the causes of mental problems, the groups that may need (extra) support, the timing of actions and effective methods and locations for support, we can create an environment in which young people can develop and flourish. Project proposals will be judged on this. The jury responsible for selecting the winning projects will include young people and researchers.

## Which young people participated?

On 13 March 2024, some 50 young people aged between 15 and 25 from all over Belgium took part in our reflection moment. All young people were welcome! Young people with and without experience of mental problems, young people from all educational tracks and fields of study, young people from large cities, smaller towns and more rural areas, young people who study, work or are looking for work, young people born in Belgium and those not born in Belgium ...

First, they listened to short presentations by the six researchers (simultaneous translation was provided). Afterwards, they discussed in 6 groups (per language) with moderators about young people's mental well-being and their experiences: their ideas about the possible causes of unease, target groups, ways to deal with it, ...

Young people who wish to do so can stay involved in the rest of the multi-year project.

## Which researchers participated?

**Arnaud Philippot** wears two hats. His first job is as a physiotherapist in mental health, where he works with teenagers admitted to psychiatric wards, using exercise as a therapeutic approach. His second cap is a researcher at the University of Louvain-la-Neuve and KU Leuven, where he studies the impact of physical activity, as prevention and care, on the mental health of adolescents in schools, universities and hospitals.

**Lies Saelens** works as a doctoral researcher at the Department of Sociology at Ghent University. Her research focuses on stigma related to mental health and psychological difficulties among adolescents in secondary education. This research investigates from a

culture- and diversity-sensitive perspective which factors influence stigma and how school plays a role in this.

**Jessy Siongers** is a sociologist attached to the VUB (Brussels) and Ghent University. She coordinates the interuniversity Knowledge Centre for Cultural Research and is one of the promoters of the Youth Research Platform. She participated in several national and international studies on children and young people such as the Flemish Youth Monitor and Children's Worlds, an international study on the well-being of children and young people. Jessy is co-president of Foundation P&V.

**Olivier Servais** is professor of anthropology and dean of the faculty of economic, political, social and communication sciences at the University of Louvain-la-Neuve. His research interests include the mental health of young people. He is one of the experts on the Conseil Supérieur de la Santé. Besides his academic career, he is also active in civil society organisations. He is former president of the *Scouts et Guides pluralistes* and co-president of the P&V Foundation.

**Pascal Minotte** is a psychologist and codirector of the Centre de Référence en Santé Mentale. For the past 15 years, he has been working on issues related to the (problematic) use of the internet and video games as part of various research projects and training courses he gives to professionals in mental health and related sectors. Among the topics he has worked on are: screens in childhood, the use of social media in adolescence and their impact on mental health, cyberbullying, the use and problematic use of video games and EVRAS (=education in relational, affective and sexual life) in the digital age.

**Robin Achterhof** is a researcher at KU Leuven and Erasmus University Rotterdam. At the longitudinal SIGMA study, he and his colleagues are researching the mental health of Flemish adolescents. In this, using a lot of short questionnaires on smartphones, he mainly looks at young people's daily social lives.



# Call for projects "Feeling You(th)"

## Practical information

### What are we looking for?

With the Feeling You(th) call for projects, we are looking for:

- actions that **promote protective factors** for mental health in young people,
- initiatives that **reduce risk factors** for mental health problems in young people, and/or
- ways to **detect initial symptoms** of unwellness and **intervene** at an **early stage**.

The project proposals have a clear idea of the why, who, when, how and where of their proposed actions or initiatives (see earlier in this note).

### For example

- **Mental Health Ambassadors:** Training young people to act as peer mentors in schools and youth clubs, teaching them how to support their peers and recognise mental health problems.
- **Inclusive Sports Programmes:** Organisation of weekly, free sports activities for young people from diverse backgrounds, with a focus on team spirit, emotion regulation and self-confidence.
- **Digital Resilience Workshops:** Trainings in schools and online platforms that teach young people to recognise cyberbullying, deal with it and develop healthy digital habits.
- **Therapeutic Creative Sessions:** Creative workshops such as writing, painting, or music-making where young people can express and process their emotions in a supportive environment.
- **Therapeutic hiking sessions:** Hiking sessions guided by a confidant or therapist, with a therapeutic hike in the mountains as the icing on the cake.
- **Loneliness-fighting initiatives:** Organisation of weekly social events during summer in community centres, parks, ... to combat loneliness and encourage new friendships.

- **Empathy and Communication Courses:** Training courses for both young people and parents in effective communication and empathetic listening, to strengthen understanding and support within families.
- **Safe Meeting Places:** Create accessible and inclusive meeting places where young people can come together, relax, and engage in activities in a safe and supportive environment.
- **Awareness and Destigmatisation Campaigns:** Public campaigns and school projects that discuss mental unwellness, break taboos and embrace diversity so that all young people feel understood and supported.
- **Nightly Listening Line and Chat Service:** A nightly anonymous telephone and chat line staffed by trained (youth) volunteers where young people can share their concerns without judgement.
- **Online Peer Support Groups:** Virtual chat groups where young people with similar experiences can support each other and share experiences under the guidance of a moderator.
- **Mobile Listening Bus:** A mobile unit that visits different neighbourhoods and schools, where young people can talk anonymously and confidentially to professional health workers.
- **School-based Confidential Advisors:** Appointment of trained external confidential counsellors working in a school to whom young people can turn for an approachable ear and support for mental health problems.
- **Workshops on Healthy Performance Expectations:** Sessions in schools where experts teach young people and those around them how to set realistic goals, deal with expectations and balance schoolwork and relaxation.
- **Peer Mediation Programmes:** Training students as mediators who can help resolve conflicts and promote a positive school culture.
- **Supporting vulnerable groups:** Guidance programmes that help young people in poverty or with disabilities through key transitions in their lives, such as from school to work, to provide them with the necessary support and resources.
- ...

## Timeline

- **13 March 2024:** reflection moment researchers and young people in Brussels.
- **27 June 2024:** launch call for projects.
- **18 September 2024:** Public inspiration moment "Mental state of the youth" to which researchers, young people, organisations, policy officers... are invited.
- **27 September 2024 (at 23:59):** deadline for project call submission.
- **October 2024:** based on the applications, a committee of young people and professionals will make a first selection of the best project proposals.
- **November/December 2024:** pitch of the best-ranked projects to a jury of young people and researchers, after which they will select the winning projects to receive financial support in 2025.
- **2025:** Implementation of winning projects and follow-up by the Foundation (together with young people and researchers).
- **2026:** Final event with conclusions.

## What do we offer?

1. Grants between €5,000 and €30,000 to implement the project.
2. The winning projects will be chosen by a jury consisting of young people and researchers.
3. Input and visit from the jury's young people and researchers.
4. Advice and guidance/coaching from P&V Foundation and P&V Group colleagues for the organisation's own operations, e.g. around communication strategy, GDPR, networking... (if required).
5. Peer-to-peer learning (community with the other winning projects)
6. Communicating about and publicising the project in the media and within the P&V Foundation networks.
7. Assistance and possible additional funding in organising a civic crowdfunding campaign at Growfunding (if desired and as long as it is an extension of the project supported by the P&V Foundation).

## Admissibility

1. The initiator of the project is an organisation in the broad sense. This can be a non-profit organisation, but also a school, a youth organisation, a sports club, or a de-facto association.

PCSWs, other public services, (social economy) companies are not eligible for this call, but partnerships with these actors can.

Purely commercial projects will not be accepted.

2. The candidate file is completed in full, within the stipulated deadline, and in Dutch or French.
3. The promoter submits only one project for this call, but can be a partner in other projects.
4. The project should be able to be implemented sometime between January 2025 and January 2026.
5. The project must be carried out mainly in Belgium. Trips abroad are allowed, insofar as they depart from Belgium and promote the mental well-being of young people.